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ABSTRACT

A respected method of studying comparative education is that of analyzing national character and assessing its impact on methods and systems of education. Like anthropologists, comparative educators must immerse themselves in a society in order to study its educational system. This analogy raises the issue of methodology, and many studies have investigated what form an anthropological study of education should take. It is generally agreed that the credibility of an ethnographic approach rests upon the thoroughness of the investigators' understanding of the larger culture. The remainder of this conference paper analyzes a 1982 article which is said to have mistakenly assumed that government aid to private schools was introduced in Australia without difficulty and that this experience was relevant to discussion of such aid in the United States. A conclusion asserts that comparative education researchers need a sound understanding of societies, and must not be over-eager in drawing comparisons between one country and another. (KH)

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HOW NOT TO DO COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Comparative and International Education Society (11th, Hamilton, New Zealand, 21-24 August, 1983).

HOW NOT TO DO COMPARATIVE EDUCATION*

PETER WEST

A respected method of studying comparative education is that of studying national character and assessing the impact of such character on methods and systems of education. In this paper, the method is discussed with reference to the work of Mallinson and Kandel. Following this, some methodological approaches are discussed and references made to anthropological methods of studying comparative education. Finally, these comments are illustrated by a discussion of one recent article which ignores all the above considerations, with stunning results.

In a lucid introductory book on comparative education, Phillip Jones explains aspects of the work of Vernon Mallinson. Jones says that Mallinson's fundamental proposition is that the kind of education any given country experiences is determined by its national character. Such national character is largely determined, Mallinson maintains, by heredity, national environment, social heritage and education.[1] This begs the question of whether education - in its broadest possible sense - creates national identity, or vice versa; but in any event, Mallinson's insistence that comparative education begins with a study of the particular qualities that make an American, or Australian, or New Zealander, what he/she is, is a very proper one.

Similarly, I.L. Kandel, in a pioneering 1933 work, Studies in Comparative Education, declares:

> the comparative approach demands first an appreciation of the intangible, impalpable spiritual and cultural forces which underlie an educational system: the factors and forces outside the school matter even more than what goes inside it.[2]

If this is so, then it is impossible to make any sense of an educational system without a deep understanding of the society into which that system is embedded. In a recent study of educational policy in Alberta, Canada, I found that, as Social Credit declined and was replaced in a landslide 1971 election by a much more pragmatic Conservative government, the whole political climate of Alberta changed.

As a "new broom" was announced to sweep through the tangled thicket of the bureaucracy, the new government moved steadily towards a total reconstruction of Alberta's post-secondary education. By 1972 legislation was announced which established a new Department of Advanced Education, giving the government across-the-board control over many aspects of education in the province.[3] This move aroused much anger in the province's universities and is still an item of bitter debate in Canadian higher education. But few perceive its origins in the political culture of the province. In sum, provincial character was the first item which a policy analyst had to understand before turning to the details of policy. It is nonsense to try to study education without a sound understanding of political culture and what Kandel calls (above) "spiritual and cultural forces".

This makes a comparative educator or policy analyst akin to an anthropologist, who immerses himself in a society in order to study it and its education system. It is necessary to turn now to anthropological approaches to education in order to deepen the comparison and to make some comments about methods of studying education.

In the last twenty years much has been done to investigate anthropological approaches to education. There is not room here to list all the significant works on the subject, but one or two will be quickly referred to. A key volume, Education and Culture: Anthropological Approaches, was edited by George Spindler and published in 1963. This canvassed the common elements between anthropology and the study of education and explored how one could inform the other. More recently, ethnographic approaches to various aspects of education have been taken by Harry Wolcott,[4] Frank Lutz[5] and Fritz Mulhauser.[6]

Many studies have discussed the question of methodology. If an anthropological approach is to be taken, how should it be done? The advocates of the anthropological, or "soft" methodology, stress that they are above all not in favour of rapid data collection. If research is to be done on teaching, they argue, then this is best done by means of painstaking study, perhaps by an "observer" who sits at the back of the class as participant and observer. Harry Wolcott's brilliant book The Man in the Principal's Office was written after Wolcott shadowed an

American school principal for a year. Such a study is far from a "quick and dirty" snapshot of a school administrator, and as a practised ethnographer, Wolcott was able to see the many ways in which school and society were interrelated. In an article on ethnographic approaches to education, Stephen Wilson suggests that questions can be asked of an ethnographic researcher to gauge his credibility. These include:

> What was the researcher's role in the setting (e.g. teacher, administrator, researcher?)
>
> What was his training and background?
>
> What was his previous experience in the field?
>
> What was the purpose of the field study?
>
> Who supported the study?
>
> How long was the researcher in the setting?
>
> How regularly was he there?
>
> Where did he spend most of his time?
>
> With whom did he spend most of his time?
>
> Which members of the community were his informants?[7]

These are a very useful set of questions to apply to any educational researcher who has done a "field visit". It is time to turn to our case study in order to apply the questions.

THE CASE IN QUESTION

Jones declares that one of the worst possible approaches to comparative education is a package tour approach. In other words, the researcher meanders from one country to another, making idle remarks about language, educational systems and educational policies.[9] Just such an article appeared recently, from an educator who had apparently made a literal tour to Australia in order to inform himself about Australians and their education "system". The article was written by Joel Sherman and appeared in Comparative Education Review in October 1982. It brilliantly illustrates the points made so far in this paper.

The theme of the article seems to be that government aid to private schools has been introduced in Australia with very little difficulty (and that the same might be done in the United States). Few students of

education could state this theme as confidently as Mr. Sherman:

> With the initiation of aid, however, first indirectly in the form of tax deductions and later as small parts of modest Commonwealth categorical programs, public hostility to government aid gradually dissipated.[9]

It would be more accurate to say that with the commencement of aid, public hostility increased. "State aid to private schools" has been a rallying cry in politics in this country at least since the 1840s.[10] In 1963, when "State aid" was still being debated, Mr. Robert Menzies, then Liberal Party Prime Minister, offered a token amount of assistance for science facilities in public and private schools. The offer caught many people off-guard and it was not until 1965 that opponents of aid became organized in a "Defence of Government Schools" pressure group. This group attracted nearly seven per cent in state and national elections and succeeded in keeping "State aid" alive as a controversial issue.[11] The issue remained alive as aid to private schools increased under the Fraser national government of 1975-83. Mr. Sherman notes this being reduced, it is unfair that some schools should be arbitrarily given more funds. Thus Mr. Sherman has failed to understand that aid to private schools has always divided Australians and that aid proposals have frequently aroused religious and political party passions. Lack of understanding of a key aspect of Australian political culture has led him badly astray.

Aid to private schools in Australia, secondly, has always been involved with the notion of class. Some private schools in Australia have been preferred by the wealthy as schools which will groom their sons and daughters for their places at the head of government, business and the professions. One school of this nature is described in a recent book:

> We head off from this office, out through a marble-floored hall with a great domed ceiling and a grand mahogany staircase, to an exit that takes us on to a wide verandah from where we get a first glorious glimpse of the sparkling Sydney Harbour, with the spectacular nautilus shells of the Opera House to one side. "I doubt if any other school in Australia, or the world for that matter, has a view like that", the headmaster remarks.[12]

This school received $3.3 million per year, a quarter of it from the national and state government.[13] Is it just that this school should receive aid when it has such demonstrable advantages over public schools in suburbs where most of the inhabitants exist on welfare? This issue is misunderstood by Mr. Sherman, who seems to see current programs for school aid as equitable[14] while he ignores the moral implications of aid to wealthy schools. Probably the idea of class in Australia is not easily understood by package tourists.

Third, in his enthusiasm for examining national policy proposals, Mr. Sherman virtually ignores state policy-making. The fact is that the prime responsibility for education in Australia rests with the states.[15] Prior to the establishment of Australia as a nation, legislation in the states began to lay down the basis for public school systems. Mr. Sherman's lack of familiarity with these systems leads him into significant distortions of reality, for instance his bland assertion that Schools Commission guidelines "are generally not viewed as a major restriction on local discretion".[16] Federal programs are administered as a rule through State - level instrumentalities and the seventies were marked by a great degree of national-state tension at almost every level, particularly in education.[17]

The fourth point is the most important of all. Is it true, as Mr. Sherman claims, that Australia and the U.S. are basically similar societies? Unfortunately Mr. Sherman's language betrays him:

> Even a cursory examination of the history and economic, political and social backgrounds of the United States and Australia suggests a strong degree of commonality between the two countries. They share a common language and similar traditions, similar constitutional provisions and governmental structures ...[18]

Mr. Sherman strides on in his even-league boots and every stride lands him deeper in the mire. This is the type of comment which could only be written by a poorly-informed reader, after precisely such a cursory examination as Mr. Sherman has indeed made. There <u>are</u> similarities between Australians and Americans, but any worthwhile historian or anthropologist will give clues to the differences between them.[19] Australian education, to narrow the focus a little, is a blend of many

traditions: that of the English "public school" (e.g. Eton and Rugby), the trend towards comprehensive schooling in Britain and the community school movement, to name only the most obvious. In Australian public schools, prefects are used frequently to assist with school discipline, teachers have typically been educated in colleges retaining most elements of the teachers training college and principals are responsible to the State Department of Education for the school's administration. Surely these elements are not found in public schools in the United States.

There are other problems raised by Mr. Sherman's article, especially his statement about the Australian Government having a "policy of promoting both choice and equity"[20] but time does not allow full discussion of all the misleading information in this wide-ranging and largely unsubstantiated article.

Clearly Wilson's questions (printed above) are relevant. Why did Sherman write the article? It appears that he saw Ausgralia as a case study relevant to discussion of aid to private schools in the U.S.A. Thereupon, he seems to have come to Australia, and spoken to a few public servants who perhaps encouraged him to believe that aid to private schools has been a complete success. But the whole basis for comparing Australia and the U.S.A. is a false one, as this paper has shown. It can be done - but not hastily or carelessly. Sherman shows precisely how not to do it.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to look at the question of national character and to stress its importance as a prerequisite for understanding education. It has advocated that it follows that comparative education will become a useless mish-mash of false generalizations if it is not rooted in a sound understanding of the societies from which schools and leaders and policies spring. Comparative education is a difficult field, full of traps for the unwary. Too often a beginner falls into such traps because of his over-eagerness to find similarities between one country and another. This is the case in the article discussed above. I hope that its author thinks twice before he ventures into comparative education again.

FOOTNOTES

* An earlier version of this paper will appear in Comparative Education Review in October, 1983.

1. Mallinson, discussed in Phillip E. Jones. Comparative Education: Purpose and Method. St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1971.

2. Kandel, cited in Jones, p.5.

3. See, West, Peter, 'Educational elites and politics in Alberta', Challenge in Educational Administration, XXI(3), 1982 and West, Peter, The Formation of the Department of Advanced Education: A Case Study in Postsecondary Education 1966-73. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta, 1982.

4. Wolcott, Harry, The Man in the Principal's Office, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1973.

5. See for instance, Lutz, Frank and Ramsey, Margaret, 'The use of anthropological field methods in education', Educational Researcher III(10), November 1974.

6. Mulhause, Fritz, 'Ethnography and Policy making: the case of education', Human Organization XXXIV(3), 1975.

7. Wilson, Stephen, 'The use of ethnographic techniques in educational research', Review of Educational Research, XLVII(1), Wincer 1977, pp.261-2.

8. Jones, pp.12-13.

9. Sherman, p.397.

10. Hogan, Michael and West, Peter, Making Policy in a Changing Context: The Education Policy Process in New South Wales, Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 1980, p.9.

11. Mr. Sherman incorrectly sees DOGS as an established interest group (p.397). See Peter Freeman, 'State aid: reports of its death as a controversial issue are exaggerated', Australian Financial Review February 12, 1971 and Peter West, 'Education pressure groups in Australia, with special reference to the "State Aid" dispute in New South Wales, 1965-73', Master of Education long essay, University of Sydney, 1975.

12. Maslen, Geoffrey, School Ties: Private Schooling in Australia, Sydney: Methuen, 1982, p.57.

13. The same. Here as elsewhere Mr. Sherman fails to see the impact of state government programs.

14. Sherman, p.405.

15. Commonwealth of Australia, Constitution, Sections 106-7. State governments currently provide 91 per cent of recurrent funds for public schools. Australian Government, 'The Facts of Education', pamphlet, 1982.

16. Sherman, p.404.

17. Some of these difficulties are discussed in J.V. D'Cruz and P.J. Sheehan, eds., The Renewal of Australian Schools, Hawthorn, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1978.

18. Sherman, pp.391-2.

19. George Spindler makes a few apt comments about Americans: "We believe that success is to be won by hard work, but emphasise 'personality' and social contacts as means to getting ahead. We laud honesty as a virtue but acknowledge the primacy of pragmatic expediency in real life. We are egalitarian in ideal and in much of our practice, but indulge in wide-ranging and destructive expressions of invidious prejudice. We deny sexuality but titillate ourselves with sex in our mass media, dress and imagery. Our culture is patterned in conflicts that in part mirror the struggle between the puritan ethic and the demands and opportunities of an industrialising society of abundance". Spindler, 'The Transmission of American Culture', in Spindler (ed.), Education and Culture: Anthropological Approaches, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, p.149. Australia's national character has been aptly described by Russel Ward as deriving from a harsh climate and the friendship it produces among men 'outback'. Ward also explores some of the differences between Australians and Americans. See Ward, The Australian Legend, Melbourne, 1958.

20. Sherman, p.405. But do poorer parents have the same freedom of choice as do wealthier parents?